

Developing my child's self-advocacy skills

Background

Help your child succeed in a mainstream classroom by arming him or her with some simple strategies. These strategies include giving your child scripts to use in different circumstances, understanding the basic function of a cochlear implant, developing hand signals to communicate with the teacher and/or peers, and knowing when and how to speak to his or her teacher and/or peers. You may already work with your child to develop these skills for everyday life, but we discuss these strategies below in the classroom context.

Strategies

- **Scripts**

- Practice using scripts with your child that he or she may use in different situations. Model the use of these scripts whenever you can. Indeed, use the scripts yourself in everyday situations to help reinforce their usefulness for your child. Practice will make it more likely your child will use the scripts naturally. If your child cannot hear something the teacher or a classmate said, practice saying: "I didn't hear you," or "Could you say that again, please?"
- If your child needs help, practice saying: "I need help, please."

- **Understanding the cochlear implant**

Depending upon the age and readiness of your child, you can teach him or her to do these tasks. We list the tasks in order from simple to more complex:

- Replace the transmitter/headpiece if it falls off.
- Put the microphone back over the ear if it drops off.
- Tell an adult when the cochlear implant is not working properly.
- Know the names of the different parts of the cochlear implant.
- Know to avoid plastic slides on the playground because of static.
- Know to keep the cochlear implant dry.
- Turn processor on/off.
- Replace batteries.
- Adjust settings on the cochlear implant, depending upon the noise in the environment.
- Adjust settings on an FM system.

- **Simple hand signals**

Practice a few simple hand signals that your child, the teacher, and classmates can use to convey a message without disrupting the flow of conversation, or drawing too much attention to your child's hearing loss. You can use sign language or create your own

signals. Here are some examples of common messages you may want to develop signals for:

- I can't hear you.
- It's too loud in here.
- Move closer first, then speak.
- Speak up, please.
- Did you understand what I said?
- Look your friend/teacher in the eyes, please.

- **Proxemics**

Teach your child to reduce the distance between him or herself and someone to whom he or she is listening or speaking to approximately four feet away. Show your child a concrete example of this distance. Devise a simple hand signal to cue your child to move closer to, or farther from, someone before engaging in a conversation.

- **Asking for clarification**

As your child's age and skill-level increase, he or she can work on asking for clarification by asking the speaker to repeat a message. Another great skill to practice is having your child restate what he or she heard to ensure it was correct. This will also help him or her remember complex instructions or longer strings of information.

- **Changing vocal volume**

Sometimes children with cochlear implants may not be aware of their own vocal volume. This could mean that they use too quiet or too loud a speaking voice. Practice using the appropriate level of loudness with your child so he or she can be better understood. You can create a hand signal to use when your child is speaking softly and you would like him or her to speak louder (e.g., putting two thumbs up in the air and motioning upward to indicate "louder"). You could do the opposite if your child is too loud and needs to speak more softly.

- **Getting listener's attention before speaking**

Help your child ensure a listener is ready to receive his or her message. Teach your child to state the name of the person he or she is addressing first, and to make and maintain eye contact throughout an interaction.

Tips

- Talk to your child's audiologist, speech-language pathologist, and other professionals who work in fields related to hearing, about additional strategies for building your child's self-advocacy skills.
- Tailor the self-advocacy strategies you practice with your child to his or her communication skills, age, personality, concerns, strengths, and challenges.

- Make practice fun and natural. Avoid “drilling” your child on these skills. Rather, integrate them into everyday interactions and practice whenever you have the opportunity.
- Continue building skills throughout the year. Add more difficult skills as your child masters the simpler ones.